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ABSTRACT

The first major purpose of this paper is to show the ways in which teachers can benefit from research and the application of research findings to classroom interactions with children. The second major purpose is to examine research findings on the quality and characteristics of teachers' interactions with children by looking at findings on teachers' verbal statements, cultural variations in children's and parents' orientation, arrangements of learning environments, and the ways in which subject matter is understood by children who are actively involved in learning. Sections of the discussion focus on: (1) teacher behavior as a form of learning that affects the child; (2) teachers' efforts to help children interpret their own efforts and relate to peers in the classroom; (3) learning and language and attitudinal differences among various cultures; (4) the classroom learning environment; and (5) subject matter as an area of knowledge for young children. Concluding remarks focus on the need for teachers to replenish themselves in the daily process of working with children. (RH)

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"EDUCATION REFORM; HOW TO BENEFIT FROM RESEARCH AND OUR EXPERIENCES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN"

This paper has two major purposes related to benefiting from research and the application of its findings to the teacher's classroom interaction with children. The **first purpose** involves the knowledge that we can, as teachers: (a) become aware of our own thinking processes as they relate to the way we interact with children; (b) learn to examine our own typical habits of response, and (c) focus on our internal efforts to change our views and behavior if necessary. The **second purpose** follows with an examination of the research findings regarding the quality and characteristics of teacher interaction with children by: (a) looking at the findings in classroom practices regarding **teachers' verbal statements** to children and how these statements may be interpreted by children; (b) **cultural variations in children's and parents' orientation** and attitudes toward learning and the school; (c) **arrangement of learning environments** that will enhance learning of individual children; and (d) **how subject matter is understood** by children when they are actively involved in making it become a part of themselves.

Teacher Behavior as a Form of Learning Affecting the Child

We can, as teachers, become aware of the way we think and make decisions regarding our work with children. Research on **metacognition** suggests that we can analyze our own thought processes. We can become more psychologically aware of some of our own habits of response as they relate to helpfulness in children's learning. Our patterns of behavior which are a result of past experiences regarding our own childhood experiences with teachers and our own parents may not reflect the most recent findings in the psychology of education. They typically are about

one hundred years old because they reflect adult views of past generations which provided the views of our parents and teachers. And surely when we learned about them as children, we did not think of how we might be of most benefit to children in a classroom. Those ideas and behaviors and thought patterns may not necessarily be the best ones to transfer to the relationships we have with today's children in the classroom.

We have learned through the research of others, who were interested in the effects of what the teacher says to children, that the teacher can make a distinctive difference affecting children's efforts and personality characteristics. Children respond well to purposeful suggestions from the teacher. Children learn to view themselves and their own efforts in ways that can facilitate learning. When teachers become aware of the subtle comments they make and how their words influence the child in self-knowledge and in thoughts of who the child is and what he or she is capable of accomplishing, teachers can check and perhaps re-stylize their own habits in the classroom.

Not only can teachers' sensitivities and re-stylization help the children, it can greatly help teachers enjoy their work with children. It can also minimize the burnout that teachers experience when they stop learning about new practices and ideas for the classroom. They also need to experience with vital satisfaction the time they spend with children. Most teachers have chosen to be in the teaching profession because they wished to make a difference in children's lives. Frequent realization of that wish is needed.

Teacher Responses in Helping Children Interpret Their Own Efforts and in Relating to Peers in the Classroom

Looking at the first of four areas of research in this paper affecting classroom teaching, which focuses on the way teachers speak to children during typical daily interaction, we note the writing of several different authors and investigators. One writer calls our attention to the importance of the appropriate use of praise. O'Brien (1990) suggests that teachers be discriminating in the way they praise children. Teachers should be specific, not lavish and dishonest in their praise. Children can

recognize insincerity. O"Brien indicates that effus praise does not prepare children for the realities in the world. Teache.. need to stop and look at the child's work and find a specific reason for praise or for suggestions to improve.

Dweck and Elliott's research (1983) points out how children view themselves and their own work. Some children's **locus of control** is internal. They attribute their successes or failures to themselves and their own efforts. Some place blame on or give credit to the external aspects of themselves or to their environment. They may blame the teacher, negative feelings of the teacher toward them, or other aspects in the classroom situation that "caused" them to fail. They do not look within themselves to find reasons for having satisfying or nonsatisfying experiences or for "winning" or "losing" in various situations.

The researchers Dweck and Elliott also found that the children who are overly concerned about how they appear to others (whether others will think they are smart or not) are inhibited in learning. Children who are more concerned about what they wish to learn and are curious, regardless of whether they have the "right" answers or not, are the children who have higher achievement motivation.

One of the reasons it is important that teachers help children focus on what they do, on **their efforts** in learning or in relating to other children, is that focusing can help children realize that they, themselves, can affect what happens to them. Children can learn that what they would like to happen cannot be left to chance. They can affect their own lives and the successes and satisfactions in them. Of course, when they do not achieve what they want, another set of reasons would have to be considered.

George Herbert Mead, (1934) a social philosopher wrote that we regard ourselves as others regard us. We look at ourselves in terms of the interpretations we have of the way other people think about us. Charles Horton Cooley, (1902) too, talked about a "looking-glass self." We imagine we are the reflections that we see in other people's eyes about ourselves. Both writers indicated that we formulate our impressions of who we are in terms of what we think others think of us.

One can easily see the implications of the messages of Mead and of Cooley. If we are treated with respect and dignity, we act in those terms. If we are treated as if we do not matter and as if our ideas are not important, we begin to believe those behavioral expressions are really true about us. We think we are the people that others lead us to believe we are, simply because they treat us in a manner that indicates they care or do not care about us. When one stops to consider how **powerful** those impressions are, teachers have to think about their words and gestures in relation to each child.

Teachers of young children can see the beginnings of social interaction among children. It is increasingly important that children be given assistance in knowing the various ways to approach others effectively in their classrooms. Knowing how to be considerate, thoughtful, helpful, cooperative as well as knowing how to take directions when needed become a significant part of learning the human relations process. Goldschmidt, an anthropologist, (1990) discusses the lifelong process of wanting to be regarded highly by a community of people. We **seek meaning** in our lives. We want to be understood and respected. Each culture has its own categories indicating what kind of behavioral characteristics earn respect. Teachers can help children learn how to relate effectively to others--younger and older than they. What the children learn in the classroom can become a blueprint for ways to make effective contacts with others in the classroom and a very significant social handle to use when relating to others outside the classroom.

Language and Attitudinal Differences Among Various Cultures and Learning

The second research emphasis in this paper that affects what teachers can do in the classroom is on the **cultural variations** of children and their attitudes toward learning and the school. Several approaches have been discussed by educators and researchers who have studied the process of children faced with learning a non-native language when they enter school. Schools have certain views that are valued over others. Depending on the teachers and their abilities to speak various languages, schools will tend toward favoring one approach or another.

Dias Soto (1991) says there are many misconceptions about young

children's ability to learn a second language. Diaz Soto indicates that when children are exposed "naturally," meaning that children hear the native language spoken every day at home and that they are **not formally instructed**, they do not find it difficult to learn two languages simultaneously. This should not be interpreted to mean that all young children have an easier time learning several languages based on a view that they have fewer inhibitions getting in the way of responding to the new language.

Various themes are involved in second language instruction. One involves an **additive approach** (Diaz Soto, p. 33) in which children are first instructed in their native language and in just enough English to become functional in thir school work. As they become more proficient in English, they are offered more in English instruction in connection with learning the subject matter such as science, mathematics, social studies. The children are always given support for their native language usage, however. Our language is part of our personality and our behavior. It should not be negated.

In the **transitional approach** to second language instruction (Diaz Soto, p. 33), the child is encouraged to learn the English language rapidly through conversation and through being immersed immediately in hearing and speaking the English language at school. The effort of the teachers is placed in having the child be exposed to the English language in as many ways possible and to minimize using the native language until it is not used at all.

The **maintenance/developmental approach** (Diaz Soto, p. 33) to second language instruction emphasizes the child's development in his or her primary language usage and also the mastery of English. This developmental view emphasizes a perspective of learning a language in the same way one would learn to walk. Eventual mastery is expected. No one stops the child from learning to walk nor says he or she can't learn. The child is simply encouraged to do so. Everyone **expects the child will learn** as he or she is given opportunities to do so and is not discouraged in the process.

Another approach, called the **two-way bilingual approach**, (Diaz Soto, p. 34) involves both the children who are learning English as a second language and the children for whom English is already a native language. It is expected that several advantages can result from this approach. Children from both language groups understand each other's culture better than they had prior to this form of learning. It is also suggested that children are learning to think in divergent terms, because they have to adapt their thinking to another point of view in another language. Diaz Soto points out another successful approach (p. 34) as one of going from native language instruction to second language instruction and then going back again to the native language using literature and social studies.

The teacher's attitudes toward the children are crucial in showing acceptance, not impatience with the children. The developmental process of children in learning anything involves and adult role of encouragement, acceptance, and helping children in a love of learning and its process.

Pressures to push children toward **leaving** something, whether it is their own language or anything else when they are trying to master a new form of any kind, places unfair hurdles in their path. They must be allowed to continue to search for thier own answers so that what they discover can be assimilated into their own internal system or patterns of learning. Our lives only make sense to us as we can interpret what we see and hear into some kind of framework for meaning. This is what children are trying to do. We as adults continue to search for meaning throughout our lives. Often we do not have the assistance we need or people around us to help us in knowing what we need. We must give children ample opportunity to find richness of meaning in their lives through the symbols afforded by language and other nontangible forms of cultural origins that they will discover at school.

As Goldschmidt said in his book, The Human Career, our language or symbolic system is a result of a psychological function as well as a cultural one. Each culture categorizes the universe in its own way and its language reflects those differences.

When we consider that reality is perceived differently by us and is also dependent on the culture as well as the particular family in which we

were raised, it is understandable that we will not understand all the children for whom we are responsible in the classroom. We have to learn to know them. The arbitrariness of the categories we use in constructing our own perceptions of reality from among the events and people we see around us, should give us a sense of unease. We should as adults want to reexamine many concepts we learned as a child from our parents at least twenty five or more years ago. They learned from their parents representing at least fifty years from today. Consequently we need to be aware that our own reality has to be adjusted to what we ourselves think reality truly is in terms of our individualistic view of our own current adult world.

Harris, (1991) in her research findings on African American children's literature, indicates that whether nonAfrican American children know African American children or not, they should all be exposed to the literature of various cultures. She suggests that it is to all children's advantage to learn about other cultures through their literature. She says that children should know about the trials and experiences of children from other cultures.

It is not too difficult to understand why teachers need to update their knowledge about today's world and cultures. The substance, facts, events, interpretations of life surrounding them today and from which they create their perceptions of reality could not have been known when they were younger.

Goldschmidt also indicated that all cultures need some way of dealing with the emotional aspects of human interaction. He said that, "No one can be emotionally neutral toward himself and since that self is perceived through others, no person can be emotionally neutral to others either. Love, hate, jealousy, despair, empathy, fear, joy, satisfaction, elation, depression and sentiments that do not evey appear in our lexicon become entangled in human activity.....the very behavioral flexibility of human beings requires the imposition of a structure; a structure that enables the human capacity for individual creativity to work in concert with others. But these are not necessarily constraints, nor are they shackles. The most important limitations on behavior are the culturally defined goals, which offer personal satisfaction by soliciting positive affect and thereby

creating a positive self-image," (p. 242)

Goldschmidt's work and Harris' views carry strong implications for the teacher's classroom behavior which ought to be strongly embedded basic ideas of cultural and human understanding. Teachers have to expand their knowledge about other cultures. They have to become highly sensitive to differences among parents and their expectations for children in the school. When there seems to be a conflict between so-called "American actually are in today's multicultural society and by whose standards are those values held in high regard.

Teachers have a strong obligation to discuss cultural differences with others to determine whether they are actually differences from American multicultural values, or are merely another way of saying something that is similar to the values held to be important in American social institutions. This attitude on the part of the teacher suggests that the teacher has to be an active listener to the parent when he or she discusses concerns or conflicts with the American school. The attempt to help children in their development regardless of cultural differences brings us to the third point of emphasis in this paper, the significance of the classroom learning environment.

Classroom Learning Environment

Most teachers are aware that the learning environment has to have enough materials and activities to challenge and satisfy all the children in the classroom. Teachers typically know each child and their levels of learning. Based on that knowledge, the teacher is expected to "take the child from where he or she is" in that level of learning and go beyond to higher levels.

Research indicates that human beings-- no matter how young or old-- have the desire to know what is happening in the world around them. How they make sense of that world is an individual inner construction of reality. (Piaget, 1960, Vygotsky, 1979) We have to bring what we know to the foreground when we are learning new material and connect it with what we already know. Children's development should be considered as having "zones of proximity." (Vygotsky, p. 86) "The zones of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are

currently in an embryonic state. .....The actual developmental level characterizes mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterizes mental development prospectively." (pp. 86, 87) This suggests that we as educators realize that while tests may assume what children **already seem to know** when they respond by themselves, we really do not know what they are **capable of "almost doing"** with the teacher's or someone else's help. Vygotsky was discussing the difference between child development and school learning. He said that children's learning begins long before they attend school. Children have had experiences with shape, size and quantity long before they learn the formal operations of arithmetic. Learning and development are interrelated, but they are not the same. In fact, the **developmental process** lags behind learning. When a child appears to know something at the initial stages of formal learning, he or she is just beginning that awareness in the developmental process. The child has not yet mastered the formal learning which he or she encounters in the classroom. This process, or the Vygotsky's concept of the zone of promimal development has implications for the expectations a teacher of young children ought to have for their learning capacities.

Teachers of young children need to know that just because a child does not express knowledge of something, it does not mean that the child does not know it. The child may have had experiences in certain areas and may not know the formal or "school name" for those experiences. This area of the unknown in regard to what teachers or educators **think children know** because children are able to discuss it, suggests however that what children express are not the full potential or boundaries of **what they are capable of doing** at any given time. When we refer to developmental levels of children, we have to consider not only what they are able to complete by themselves, but also what they are able to do with help from someone else. The challenge to the teacher becomes broader than ever to provide children with activities that can pose a broader potential for the children's grasp of "systematized" or humanly conceived facts of knowledge.

Having a variety of materials in the classroom ensures that something will be available for every child's abilities and skills. Teachers have to decide which materials are best based on their own judgment relative to

the specific needs of children in their classrooms. The classroom learning environment should provide materials for active learning, large equipment that involves large muscle movement of children. The classroom environment should involve stories, attractive and durable story books. It should have materials that can be used for science (e.g., magnets, color wheels, balance scales, cooking activities), animals as pets, constructive block play, wood inlay puzzles for hand and eye coordination, crayons, nontoxic paints, social stuides topics that deal with factual information on bridges, tunnels, building, machinery, energy, the work world and family life of various cultures.

While subject matter in the form of books, materials, and activities are experienced by young children, it does not mean that the children experience an awareness of subject matter in a formalized, restrictive, manner by any means. They have experiences touching, sensing, smelling, seeing, and hearing about a variety of topics that have meaning for them. The learn by becoming involved in the materials.

The children have books and stories on the subject matter about which they are able to learn. They do not, however, have formalized lessons on them. Teachers are aware that the learning environment has to be enjoyable and satisfying if the children are to retain what they learn. The format has to change from time to time, even though children are comfortable with routines. They like to know what is expected of them and enjoy being able to go from place to place in the classroom to get materials, to put them away, and to place their finished products where the teacher said they needed to be.

The learning environment must be safe for children. Any time new materials or equipment are added, the teacher must watch for hazards. Teachers have to anticipate accidents and be sure to place materials where children can easily move around in the classroom without tripping over anything.

While the classroom is expected to be childproof and safe for all children, the teacher must observe and supervise the class so that any unanticipated freak kind of accident can be avoided. Children are quick. They move rapidly. Unexpected friction that may arise between or among

children can also result in unusual pulling or pushing that can force objects down from high places or cause objects to break. Children standing nearby can also be hurt from the fallout of these altercations.

Learning environments not only have to be carefully planned and used, but also have to include topics that are appropriate for children of each age level. We know that in one classroom of children who may be of similar chronological age range, there can be two or three years of age differences when we consider their psychologial, social, academic, and physical ages. This brings us to the last area of consideration related to research and children's subject matter learning.

Subject Matter as an Area of Knowledge for Young Children

These areas have typically been of great interest to researchers in mathematics, science, in social studies, and other elementary school subjects taught to children. It is not very difficult to find studies on the subject matter areas themselves. What is not easy, however, is to glean from those studies what is appropriate for young children. Young children in their early years are not expected to learn in formalized structures. They are not expected to struggle with systematized formulae until they are older and can manage analytical thought at those levels. Children in prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms are not developmentally ready to learn in the **same format or classroom style** used with elementary school children.

Educators concerned about young children have learned from developmental psychology and the nature of learning that children need greater freedom of movement in the classroom. The children need interaction with others and the opportunity to talk to one another about the subject matter in the process of learning. It sometimes allows an internal process to become easily externalized. What they learn can become more real than only an abstraction when they talk about it. The **form** and **process** in which kindergarten and prekindergarten children become familiar with various subject matter areas differ from the classroom structure and teacher information given to children in elementary and later grades.

Classroom routines and lesson plans of the kindergarten and prekindergarten teacher should focus on having the children interact with the subject matter materials on science, mathematics, social studies, language arts, and reading as much as possible. The teacher should not stand before the children and instruct them or give them fifteen or twenty minutes of instruction or of information on a subject. The children should be working actively on the materials. If magnets are the subject in the area of science as an aspect of learning, then children must use the magnets with things that attract and some objects that are not attracted by the magnet in order to get **a sense of how it works.** Cooking experiences also provide opportunities for an understanding of science as well as the change of matter from one form to another. Batter can become a cake or a cookie after the energy of an oven heat is forced on it.

If the teacher wants the children to know about categories of mathematics such as adding or subtracting, materials and activities are offered to the children that will encourage that kind of learning. The teacher provides the children with opportunities in the learning environment to put large wooden or plastic shapes together, take them apart, pile them up together, spread them apart. The children are using materials that are appropriate to their age and ability and are learning through direct action on those materials. They can see the results of their own manipulation of them.

Mathematics is a product of the human mind. It is a way of providing a systematic understanding of and an application to things around us. Thus reality becomes part of a **formalized system of understanding** and children are expected to learn this system in a somewhat "natural" way. The way in which they learn is nonthreatening. We have been told by Dweck and Elliott (1983) that most children want to and are able to learn in a nonthreatening environment. Playing with wooden shapes does not intimidate them. Many children have done this since infancy and without adult supervision.

In like manner, children can develop an appreciation of language-- not in a formal lesson on it-- but by handling books, looking at the pictures, and asking the teacher to read to them. The children are also learning to discern the differences between aesthetic books on pleasant environments

or happy and cheerful stories, on the one hand, and those books that are factual and contain more serious content.

Language development is an extremely significant part of children's learning at school. They have to learn how to refer to objects and people in the environment. They have to learn which words to use so that they may properly interact with others and obtain what they need. Language awareness, words, references, exclamations, comments, questions, criticisms, all provide a basis for the way one will interact with the world. Language development provides an **essential basis for one's personality formulation. It is also crucial, of course, for developing our own logical systems of thought.**

Language development, while referred to in the classroom as a subject matter area, is really a means through which we learn subject matter. When we consider poetry, and various forms of literature, it can be thought of as an aesthetic area. It is part of the process of learning to name objects, events, as well as our feelings toward people around us. Reading is also referred to as a subject. It too is a means through which we learn about various subjects as well as the interpersonal qualities of people with whom we interact.

The **attitude of science** involves exploration, questions, trying things in various places and positions, "playing with ideas," and rarely feeling that all things have been discovered and are absolutely correct as we are doing them today. The attitude in the scientist is that we are ever searching for truth in our world. We should be seeking better answers to age-old questions. Just because something has been done in a certain way and we think it has "worked," does not mean we should not think of new or creative ways to use the same idea in a different format. Scientists base judgment on formal experimentation, it is true. But scientists do develop ideas based on intuition. We want children to develop and carry out ideas that encourage healthy and active curiosity, as long as they do not endanger themselves.

Subject matter learning is done through active involvement with the subject matter. Social studies involve learning about one's community, government, economy, supermarkets, and how communities perform and pay for services given to the people in it. Children learn about social studies through experiences they have in the classroom. They adopt or take on the role of people in the community. They have dramatic play and act out what they understand of what the storekeeper does, what the buyer or consumer does, and what a lawyer or a judge does.

Social studies include the disciplines or subject matter areas of history, geography, sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, social psychology, and philosophy. Children learn the content of social studies through experiences they have in the kindergarten and prekindergarten--not through hearing lectures on those disciplines. Learning about various cultures and the way people live in other countries also helps children understand why people respond as they do to the world.

Teachers do not have to be concerned about which period or time of the day they are teaching or providing experiences for children in various subject matter areas. The kindergarten and prekindergarten classroom structures permit less systematic separation of subject areas in the process of children's learning. In later grades, the teacher is aware of presenting in a formal manner the subjects of science, mathematics, social studies, art, and music for example. Children in later grades are ready for greater depth and analysis in the process of learning.

The teacher who understands that a comprehensive or a broad program of offerings for children can **include** various subject matter areas is providing for children a **foundation of readiness** that permits children to become familiar with various subjects. Young children need to have various experiences in acting upon objects related to subject matter knowledge in their learning environments.

Subject matter learning occurs through children's experiences. The children create their own meaning and understanding through touching, tasting, smelling, hearing, and seeing objects, events, and people around them. Their understanding is individualistic. It is real for them. It has to happen within themselves. We change as new ideas become a part of

us and **as we use those ideas in our daily lives.** With new ideas, we build even more and grow to appreciate the process of learning. The more satisfaction we receive from learning, the more we will reach out to learn and to apply ourselves to finding more in the world that has earlier been beyond our reach. In fact, that is part of the process of inspiration and the dream. We know that what may be beyond our reach at the present time, is **not beyond our reach forever.**

We should share with children the excitement and the persistence involved in learning. As teachers we can become the reformers of education in our own classroom. We can become the inspiration for our children--some of whom may not get it from anyplace or anyone else.

In closing, we need to recognize how vital it is to **replenish ourselves** in the daily process of working with children. While we are giving of ourselves in teaching and in understanding children's emotional ups and downs, we also need to strengthen our inner selves. If teachers can frequently check their own practices with children, and are able to achieve a sense of being updated in their work with children, they may not experience feelings of burnout or frustration. The feelings they may have at the end of the day are elation and stimulation from their work even while feeling that a full day has been spent. They are ready for some personally-satisfying activity in the nonschool world. Our own **emotional payback** to ourselves after a satisfying day of giving to children is also an essential part of reform in the classroom. **Reform** in the classroom is neverending, because it is a continual search for better ways of learning.

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